

# Court-imposed fines aren't answer to fully funding education

Lawmakers aren't moved by fines that are nothing but IOUs. Tough decisions must be made about local levy funds.

## [Editorial Board](#)

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State Supreme Court justices on Wednesday were said to be skeptical of the arguments made regarding sanctions levied against the state for not yet fully funding basic education as the court ordered in 2012.

The justices have reason to be dubious. The fines have been pointless.

The aftermath of the court ruling has been a fiasco. To this point, the Legislature — after years of debate and hand-wringing (mostly hand-wringing) — has merely agreed to establish a task force to study the problem and next year try to somehow resolve it.

Lawmakers have failed to come to consensus on the definition of basic education. This allowed them to delay, delay and delay so they wouldn't have to figure out how to do away with local school levies and replace that money with state funding.

The high court was right to press the state on its progress.

Sadly, the effort will likely yield nothing. The Legislature appears to be under little pressure to get the job done quickly and correctly.

The justices imposed a \$100,000-per-day fine on the state last year. Whether that has made a difference was a point of contention. The state said it has. The attorney for those who filed the lawsuit against the state said it has not.

Some state legislators seem to agree with those seeking more funding for schools. They say the fine — which is now nearly \$40 million — isn't real. It's like an IOU note. Not a penny has come out of the state operating budget or the supplemental budget approved in March.

So what should the court do next? Impose more sanctions?

That would seem to be pointless. The Legislature writes the laws and the rules. If a \$100,000-a-day fine can be rendered meaningless, so too could one that's \$1 million a day.

Ultimately, pressure has to come from the public (voters) to get the job done, meaning forcing the hard decisions necessary to comply with the court order. That would seem to start by shifting how local levy dollars are allocated or even eliminate local levies.

The court's 2012 ruling specifically said relying on local voter-approved levies to fund a major portion of school funding is unconstitutional.

In Walla Walla, for example, about 20 percent of the local school district budget comes from the local levy. Nearly all school districts in Washington rely on that much or more local funding to make the budget balance.

So given the state needs to come up with \$2 billion plus, the local levies — already ruled unconstitutional — would seem to be the logical source for more funding.

Getting serious about changes to local levies won't be popular, but it needs to be done in order to come up with a real solution. Our collective future depends on it.

Editorials are the opinion of the Union-Bulletin's Editorial Board. The board is composed of Brian Hunt, Rick Eskil, James Blethen and Alasdair Stewart